

May 23, 2019

Board of Directors and CEO, Ventura County Fairgrounds
10 W Harbor Blvd.
Ventura, CA 93001

Honorable Board Members and CEO:

We write to urge you to end the gun shows at the Ventura County Fairgrounds, a state-owned property that has prided itself in offering agricultural, educational, recreational, and entertainment events in a safe and “family friendly” environment. We are not fighting the Second Amendment, but strongly support efforts to ban gun shows at this State-owned venue.

With almost 40,000 U.S. firearm fatalities in 2018, it is critical to address gun violence as a major public health problem. Gun shows glorify gun culture for our youth, many of whom now fear a mass shooting at their school. Promoting the sale of more guns and ammunition at the Fairgrounds may contribute to future homicides, firearm injuries, suicides, accidental deaths, and gun trafficking. Target shooting has also been identified as the cause of numerous California forest fires, putting the lives of firefighters and residents at risk.

We adopted a public health approach to evaluate the pros and cons of gun shows, considering empirical research, a focus on prevention, and community stakeholder engagement. Thank you for reading and considering the case made in the following document. We hope you will put child and community safety above Fairground profits, and act to end future gun shows at your upcoming meeting. Prevention of future gun violence is key. Our youth need to know that you are doing everything in your power to insure their future safety and well-being. The decision you make on May 28th could save a child’s life and help to protect your own loved ones.

Respectfully,

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Banning Gun Shows at the Ventura County Fairgrounds:
A Call to Action for Gun Violence Prevention in Ventura County Communities

Summary

Residents of Ventura County and the state of California have suffered mass shooting incidents and continue to witness high numbers of gun deaths. Yet despite these tragic events, guns and ammunition are regularly sold at publicly-owned facilities, including the Ventura County Fairgrounds. Community members and students from schools throughout the County have urged the Ventura County Fairboard to cease hosting gun shows. Adopting a public health approach, the following document provides a rationale for terminating gun shows at the state-owned Fairgrounds.

Background

The vast majority of public health scientists and criminologists agree that the more guns, the more homicide and crime. A review of research by the Harvard Injury Control Research Center reveals that with higher levels of household gun ownership, there are more gun homicides, total homicides, gun suicides, and accidental gun deaths.¹ Firearms are now the second leading cause of death for American children and teens.² In an average month, 50 American women are shot to death by an intimate partner, and the risk of homicide increases 5-fold when the partner owns a firearm.³

Gun sales are currently increasing in California and nationally. In 2016, there was a 15% increase in California's gun-related homicide rate, reversing years of decline beginning in 2008. The violent crime rate further increased in both the State and Ventura County in 2017.⁴

Given the latter research and recent trends, Ventura County residents have urged Fair Board members to adopt a public health approach to reducing gun violence and protecting the public's safety. The national Institute of Medicine defines a public health approach as including three major elements: a focus on prevention, a reliance on scientific research to identify risk and patterns, and multidisciplinary collaboration, including community engagement, to address the problem. **Adopting this approach, we respectfully present reasons to terminate the Crossroads Gun Shows at the publicly-owned Ventura County Fairgrounds.** Our opposition to these shows is based on: 1) Detrimental Effects of Promoting Gun Culture; 2) Negative Impacts on Students and Families, Schools, and Communities, and 3) Legal Risks to the Ventura County Fair Board.

Detrimental Effects of Promoting Gun Culture

Gun shows have been described as a "flea market for firearms," enabling participants to buy, sell, and trade firearms and firearm-related accessories. California gun show attendees, including young children, encounter vendors and tables covered with thousands of conventional handguns (including semi-automatic pistols), shotguns, rifles, antique/replica guns, knives, and swords. Vendors also sell gun parts and accessories, ammunition, body armor, books, and merchandise only peripherally related to guns and shooting, such as t-shirts and jewelry.

In 2009, the Violence Prevention Research Program at the University of California, Davis Department of Emergency Medicine produced a report, *Inside Gun Shows: What Goes on When Everybody Thinks Nobody's Watching*.⁵ This report documents the broad range of activities that take place at gun shows, identifying activities that pose problems for the public's health and safety. The report is based on direct observations made at 78 gun shows in 19 states, including the Gun Shows held in Ventura County.

In addition to identifying several illegal practices observed at gun shows, the UC Davis report highlights three aspects of a gun show's social environment that may contribute to future firearm violence. These include: 1) facilitating children's access to firearms, 2) promoting objectification and violence in relationships between men and women, and 3) endorsing violence as a problem-solving tool.

Photographs in the report, including those taken at the Ventura County Fairgrounds, raise questions about whether these events are truly "Family Friendly." The report notes that "Children receive a steady stream of messages encouraging gun use, largely untampered by information or behaviors promoting gun safety. Their involvement progresses from observation and imitative play in the preschool years through independent exploration to active participation in the buying and selling of guns by early adolescence. Messages endorsing the use of violence--sometimes indiscriminate violence—to address complex social and geopolitical problems are widespread. **Support for alternative approaches was never observed.**"^{5, p 207-208} The researchers found "frequent expressions of misogyny in both the products available and sentiments expressed by attendees," with women devalued and treated as objects of sexual gratification.^{5, p 220-221}

Gun shows also feature technical books on specific guns, how-to manuals for gun maintenance and modification, and weapon-making, including "manuals for converting conventional weapons into machine guns, for making silencers, for making and using explosive devices, and for shooting down an airplane."^{5, p 204} T-shirts and bumper stickers with pro-gun messages "are ubiquitous," but more concerning are "materials promoting violence and irresponsible gun use" (e.g., bumper stickers reading 'Execute Antiwar Demonstrators' and 'When in Doubt, Empty the Magazine').^{5, p 216} Some gun shows also feature white supremacist materials.⁵

Clearly, there is no unitary gun show culture and gun show attendees have different experiences at different shows. However, attendees at the March and May 2018 Crossroads Gun Shows in Del Mar and the May show in Ventura County observed several immediate safety concerns for young children and youth, including guns and knives on tables that were easily accessible to unsupervised children.⁶ Observers also noted a failure to check all attendees' bags for their contents at the gun show entrance, posing a risk for visitors to bring loaded weapons into the crowded Fairgrounds. At its September 2018 meeting, several Del Mar Fair Board members who oversee the Del Mar Gun Shows also noted their distress at seeing "do-it-yourself kits available to make illegal automatic weapons" and "wagonloads of ammunition" being purchased at the show, including hollow-point bullets designed to expand rapidly when they hit flesh and cause more serious wounds.

Negative Impacts on Students and Families, Schools and Communities

Local Students Fearful of Mass Shootings at School

The tragic November 7, 2018 mass shooting at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, which killed 13 and injured 12, has heightened anxiety about future shootings among Ventura County students. Additionally, there have been several threats of school shootings at area schools, including Santa Paula and Renaissance High Schools earlier this week. Thus, it is not surprising that hundreds of local students have voiced fears and anxiety about the possibility of mass shootings at their schools, seriously disrupting their academic experience and learning environment.

A recent national study by the Pew Research Center found that the majority of teens (57%) are 'very worried' or 'somewhat worried' about the possibility of a shooting occurring at their school, and only 13% said they are 'not at all worried.'⁸ Nonwhite teens, including 73% of Hispanic students, were even more fearful than their white peers. Parents of teen students expressed similar levels of concern, with

63% very worried or somewhat worried about a shooting happening at their child's school.⁸ Active shooter drills are now held in many County schools. Fears for children's safety are also shared by the federal government. Recently, the Department of Homeland Security announced a grant program to teach high school students "mass casualty survival techniques" in the event of school shootings, including "medical triage and bleeding control techniques to help victims who have sustained traumatic injuries until first responders arrive."⁹

As school shootings become more common, it is important to note the psychological toll that witnessing or worrying about the threat of gun violence has on children. Numerous studies have found that exposure to firearm violence can have long-term detrimental effects, including increased anxiety, anger, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), sleep disorders, and other symptoms of trauma.¹⁰ Children may also exhibit regressions in their development (e.g., bedwetting), physical ailments, difficulties in concentration, and declines in academic performance¹⁰ Even the perceived threat of a school shooting can be damaging to children's mental health, placing them at risk for developing anxiety, hyper-vigilance, and mood disorders.¹⁰

Many Ventura County students have voiced their determination to actively work for school safety and violence prevention initiatives. Ventura County March For Our Lives, National Association of Students Against Gun Violence - Ventura Chapter and others were formed to combat school and community violence, organized walkouts to honor the Parkland victims, as well as rallies and marches throughout the County. Several local students have also appealed directly to the Ventura County Fair Board to terminate the gun shows. Grace Mansfield, a leader from the NASAGV Club at Ventura High School:

"Holding gun shows at the Ventura County Fairgrounds shows just how careless adults have become with their children's safety and the safety of the community. Gun shows perpetuate a culture in which having a weapon designed for military use and capable of ending dozens of lives in seconds is normal or necessary. Following the Borderline shooting, it is disrespectful and callous to hold these events which glorify guns, despite Ventura County's youth having shown how much we oppose their ability to rip apart classrooms and families, and our confidence that we are safe. I am ashamed that gun shows at the Ventura County Fairgrounds has been allowed to continue in light of all of the children who have died due to the inability of adults to take decisive actions on gun control."

Guns Associated with Increased Risk for Suicide

Another danger associated with gun ownership is completed suicide. Half of all gun deaths in California, and almost two thirds in Ventura County, are suicides.¹¹ Suicide is also the second most prevalent cause of U.S. deaths for youth and young adults aged 10 to 24 years.¹² Multiple studies over two decades reveal a strong association between the presence of a firearm in the home and an increased risk of suicide for both the gun's owner and his/her spouse and children.¹²

Guns are not the most frequent way to attempt suicide, but they are the most fatal. Gun availability increases the risk because most attempts are impulsive. One study found that among those who made near-lethal attempts, a quarter took less than 5 minutes and 70% less than an hour between the decision to kill themselves and an actual attempt.¹² Among individuals who survive suicide attempts, about 90% do not go on to kill themselves later on.¹³

Suicide is the leading cause of death among military veterans, and military suicide rates are increasing. Firearms currently account for 68% of veteran suicides.¹³ A recent study of student veterans who had

deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan, reported that 20% of these veterans reported suicidal thoughts with an actual suicide plan, and almost half (46%) had thought about killing themselves at one point.¹⁴ These rates are 6 times higher than college students in general. When a public health professional discussed this study with several student veterans (now successfully managing their PTSD), the students shared that they would have likely purchased a gun for a suicide attempt from a gun show. When pressed for reasons, veterans stated, “*It’s the most hassle-free way to get a gun,*” and “*Gun show sellers are there to make the sale... They don’t really care about what you want (the gun) for.*” Notably, there are approximately 42,000 veterans in Ventura County.¹⁵

The strongest predictor of how likely a person will die from a suicide attempt is a gun in the home. A gun at home makes suicide 3 times more likely, regardless of the type of gun, method of storage, or number of guns in the household.¹² Thus, limiting easy access to guns can play a key role in suicide prevention, especially for youth and young adults.

Ventura County Communities Opposed to Gun Shows

Growing numbers of Ventura County residents are opposing gun shows at the County Fairgrounds, viewing a ban as an important step in combatting the promotion and glorification of gun culture and reducing the incidence of firearm violence. NeverAgainCA – Ventura has collected the signatures of more than 3,000 residents opposed to gun shows at the fairgrounds. The county’s Board of Supervisors passed a resolution asking the Fair Board to stop hosting gun shows and the Oxnard City Council, which represents the county’s largest city, passed a similar resolution. Notably, the Ventura County Fair Board’s written policy directs Board members to consider local community values, standards, and ordinances when entering into Fairground contracts.

Other California communities have also moved to ban gun and ammunition sales on public properties. In April 2019, the Cow Palace Board of Directors voted unanimously to end Gun Shows at the venue, beginning in January 2020.¹⁶ In September 2018, the Del Mar Fair Board voted 8-1 to suspend Fairground Gun Shows for up to one year while the Board developed a policy that would likely require a complete ban on the exhibition and sale of firearms and ammunition (allowing only educational events).¹⁷ In April 2019, the State Assembly voted 48-16 to approve Assemblyman Todd Gloria’s bill to prohibit sales of guns and ammunition at the Del Mar Fairgrounds beginning in 2021, with the legislation now moving to the state Senate.¹⁸ San Mateo County, Marin County, Santa Clara County, San Francisco, and the city of Glendale have successfully banned gun shows.⁶ Notably, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has also supported a ban on gun shows at state fairgrounds.¹⁹

Gun Shows a Source of Illegally Trafficked Firearms

Most violent criminals don’t purchase their guns directly from gun shows. However, researchers have found that gun shows are “the critical moment in the chain of custody for many guns, the point at which they move from the somewhat-regulated legal market to the shadowy, no-questions-asked illegal market.”²⁰ A report released by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), examining federal gun-trafficking prosecutions involving 84,000+ illegal guns, found that 30% of the total cases had a gun-show connection.²¹ Additionally, both U.S. and Mexican officials express concerns about gun trafficking to Mexico. ATF reported that 87% of firearms seized by Mexican authorities and traced over a 5 year period came from the U.S., noting that these firearms have become increasingly more powerful and lethal. Many of these firearms were originally purchased from gun shops and gun shows in southwest border states.²¹

Target Shooting Responsible for Some State Forest Fires

Gun shows also provide easy access to reduced cost ammunition for target shooting. One clear risk of target shooting in the current environment is the possibility of forest fires. Ventura County residents are well aware of this threat, having endured the massively destructive Thomas fire that burned 282,000 acres in 2017, as well as the 2018 Woolsey and Hill fires. In February 2019, the U.S. Forest Service extended a one-year ban on unmanaged target shooting throughout the Los Padres National Forest. This ban allows forest officials and volunteers to address the proliferation of wildfires, litter, soil and water contamination, vandalism, endangered wildlife impacts, and other public safety and environmental hazards “caused by decades of unmanaged target shooting across nearly two million acres of public lands in Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, and western Kern Counties.”²² Recent forest fires ignited by target shooting in California (e.g., 2017 Detwiler Fire in Mariposa County near Yosemite) and other states have led to major fires, burning forests, destroying homes and businesses, and placing firefighters and residents at risk for injury and loss of life.

Legal Risks for the Ventura County Fair Board

Investigations of Crossroads of the West Gun Shows

In 2018, 10 organizations, led by the San Francisco Chapter of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and including NeverAgainCA, united to ask the California Department of Justice to conduct a comprehensive investigation of Crossroads of the West Gun Shows.^{23,24} Crossroads is the company that produces gun shows at state-owned venues in California, including the Ventura County and Del Mar Fairgrounds and Cow Palace in Daly City. Concerns include the discovery that the Crossroads CEO and former Vice President have been convicted of violating federal firearms laws and apparently did not disclose those convictions when entering into gun show contracts with state agencies. The organizations’ letter also cites a 2013 lawsuit brought by the San Francisco City Attorney against Crossroads and several gun sellers, alleging efforts to evade the state ban on the sale, manufacture, and import of large capacity magazines. All ten of the organizations noted above question the wisdom of hiring persons convicted of violating federal gun laws to run community gun shows.

Liability in Accidental or Negligent Shootings at Gun Shows

There have been numerous documented violations at Crossroads of the West Gun Shows at other venues, including 35 accidental (negligent) discharges of loaded firearms.²⁵ If a gun show vendor’s or attendee’s carelessness contributed to the incident, the courts will consider several factors to determine liability. Crossroads carries only \$1 million of liability insurance, a figure woefully insufficient given the potential for significant injury or death resulting from an accidental or negligent shooting. In some cases, the Fairgrounds may also face some degree of responsibility and liability, and be a party in a major lawsuit. Personal injury attorneys will help accidental shooting victims sue for large damage awards to obtain a sense of justice and begin their recovery process. For example, medical treatment, skilled nursing care for serious injuries, and compensation for lost work and pain and suffering will likely cost millions. Wrongful death cases may also be brought by heirs of shooting victims for very substantial damage awards.

Request for Action: End Gun Shows at the Ventura County Fairgrounds

In summary, residents, students and families from throughout Ventura County are urging the Fair Board to ban future gun shows. This call to action is based on a public health approach to gun violence and suicide prevention, drawing on empirical research, a prevention focus, and stakeholder engagement in

decision-making. Gun violence takes a daily toll on the lives of Californians and Americans. State residents have grown tired of the thoughts and prayers, flags at half mast, and sorrowful speeches that accompany senseless shootings.

The time for action is now. Families and communities are demanding meaningful solutions to the gun violence epidemic. Thus, we ask the Ventura County Fair Board to put child and community safety above Fairground profits from gun and ammunition sales. Fair Board members have a unique opportunity to reduce access to firearms that may be used in future school shootings, homicides, suicides, and violent crimes---inflicting grief and trauma on survivors, friends and families, teachers, first responders, and health professionals. Please ban the gun shows to ensure our publicly-owned Fairgrounds can live up to its mission as a safe and “family friendly” venue. Your decision on May 28th could save the life of a child and help to protect the people you love.

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